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UNCLAS DJIBOUTI 000540

SIPDIS

STATE PASS USAID; STATE ALSO FOR AF AND AF/E

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SUBJECT: UNUSUALLY HEAVY RAINS CAUSE SEVERE FLOODING IN DJIBOUTI

1. (U) Summary: Heavy rains and flooding earlier this week have resulted in loss of life and severe damage to Djibouti's infrastructure. This damage will present longer term dangers to the economic and social health of the country, including possible outbreaks of cholera, typhoid and malaria. Djiboutian officials have confirmed 46 dead and believe thousands to be homeless. There are no reports of U.S. citizen casualties. Minister of Interior Abdoulkader Wais has requested assistance from the U.S. Post is working with the Government of Djibouti, other major donors (particularly the French), the U.S. military, International Organizations and NGOs to coordinate our response. An official request for disaster assistance will follow septel. End Summary.

2. (U) Heavy rains on April 13 caused severe flooding in Djibouti City. Flash floods, caused by dikes breaking in the Ambouli Wadi (river bed that is dry most of the year), have caused extensive damage in several neighborhoods of the city, destroying many structures and damaging the contents of homes and businesses. The main route through Djibouti to the outer sections of Djibouti City was cut off by flooding rapids at 5:00 PM, April 13. As of 11:00 am, April 14, 46 bodies had been recovered, only half of which have been identified. The death toll will continue to rise as more bodies are found. Estimates on the street are in the range of 150 people dead. The Government of Djibouti has made general and specific requests for assistance to the U.S. government and the French military, as it lacks adequate technical, material and financial resources to fully recover from the floods.

3. (U) The highest priority for the government is to evacuate the floodwaters from homes and streets as quickly as possible. This is in effort to prevent epidemics of Cholera and Typhoid similar to the aftermath of the 1994 and 1999 floods. Since the ground has been saturated by watershed from heavy rains in Ethiopia and Somalia, the evaporation of the waters could take weeks. The stagnating water will also expand the potential for Cholera, Typhoid and Malaria outbreaks. Priority needs for the government are provisions and immediate shelter, medicine and vaccinations, water pumps, tents, and blankets. Relief efforts are being coordinated by the Office of Civil Protection.

4. (U) Roads into Djibouti from Ethiopia have several points where nothing larger than an SUV can pass, making transportation of commodities by truck virtually impossible. The Djibouti-Ethiopian Railroad also has three major washout points that will take several weeks to repair. This will affect both the commerce in Djibouti and Ethiopia, as a large portion of the imported goods come from Ethiopia and almost all food aid to Ethiopia goes through Djibouti.

5. (U) The government estimates that 90 percent of the city's population has been affected and at least 100,000 persons have been displaced. Already there are 600 displaced persons housed in a school in the Balbala section, one of the higher points of the city. There are three schools that are severely flooded within the city and the Ministry of Education has suspended classes until Saturday.

6. (U) U.S. Embassy local employees have also been affected severely, as most live in the two neighborhoods hit hardest by the flooding. The extent of the local employee needs is not yet known, however, no loss of life among the Embassy community has been reported.

RAGSDALE